



A BLOG BY
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CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Serious About Discipleship? Mentoring Is Better Than Curriculum

Small churches have a serious advantage when it comes to discipleship. If we'll use the right tools.

by Karl Vaters

August 24, 2015



“What discipleship curriculum do you recommend for small churches?”

I get asked that question a lot. And my answer almost always disappoints the questioner.

We don't use a discipleship curriculum in our church.

I'll get to why – and what we do instead – in a moment. But first, I have a question.

How well does your church disciple believers? If you're like most church leaders, you probably feel like you don't do it as well as you'd like to.

This is especially true for small churches. You've looked through curriculum, maybe even tried some of the highly-recommended programs that have worked well in the big churches you admire. But for most small churches, they don't seem to work. They haven't worked in my church either. That's why we stopped using them.

Why didn't they work for us?

Because curriculum is not the best way to disciple people.

No, using curriculum isn't bad. There's some great curriculum out there and I'm grateful for every believer and every church that has been helped by it.

But curriculum isn't the ideal way to disciple believers in most churches for one simple reason – because most churches are small. And people in smaller groups, including smaller churches, don't learn best with classroom-style curriculum. They learn best by another, so-old-it's-new learning style.

Mentoring.

Mentoring is better than curriculum.

Especially for discipleship.

Mentoring was how Jesus, Paul and the rest of the early church disciplined new believers.

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Discipleship isn't primarily about knowing theology and memorizing verses – as important as that is. The essence of discipleship is, as Paul put it, to “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Cor 1:11 – NIV)

Overcoming Our Classroom Bias

We've almost abandoned mentoring in favor of curriculum in most of the western church world.

The skeptics will tell us it's because companies can make money selling us curriculum. There's no money to be made in mentoring. While it's never wise to discount the role money plays in many of our bad decisions, I think putting the blame on the profit motive is misguided, simplistic and unnecessarily cynical in this situation.

I think the reasons are less sinister and much more boring.

It's about old habits dying hard. We're used to doing it this way. We're so accustomed to learning in a classroom setting that it's hard for us to think of doing it any other way.

In Jesus' day they didn't have a classroom bias. People learned because a mentor took an apprentice under their wing. They lived and worked together. The mentor showed the apprentice how to do the task until the apprentice could do it on their own. Then the apprentice mentored others.

It still happens that way in many non-western cultures today.

Why Curriculum?

In addition to our classroom bias, we've defaulted to a curriculum bias in most of our churches because of size. Once a church, or any group, gets beyond a certain size, mentoring becomes impractical, even impossible.

But we should stick with mentoring as long as we can. It is always the preferred way to make disciples.

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This is not an anti-curriculum rant. Curriculum is great. It can be used quite effectively to supplement a mentoring process, including providing theological and methodological guardrails against extremism. But curriculum should never replace mentoring. Especially in a smaller church.

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using curriculum that we've forgotten about mentoring.

Which brings us back to where we started. Most of the churches in the world are small. The reason we gravitate towards curriculum isn't because there are too many people to mentor. It's because we're so used to

But we need to think about what we're missing when we undermine the value of mentoring.

Ask anyone to list the top spiritual influences in their lives. They will never mention a curriculum. What do they mention? A teacher. A pastor. A parent. A friend. In other words, a mentor.

The truth is, we're already doing mentoring because we're having relationships. But we're not mentoring as well as we could because we're seldom as intentional about as we need to be.

The Power of Mentoring

I wonder. I don't know, but I wonder. Could mentoring be part of the answer to the current wave of people – especially younger people – leaving the church in record numbers?

I think the possibility is worth considering.

Talk to 100 people who have left, or are considering leaving their church. I doubt if you'd find 10 of them who have an ongoing mentoring relationship with someone at that church.

Curriculum doesn't connect us to a church body. People do. People who love Jesus and show us how to love him, too. People who love us enough to invest their time in us.

Again, curriculum is not bad. The issue isn't whether we use it, but how much we rely on it. The concentration in discipleship needs to be on the mentoring relationship, not on the curriculum.

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But Mentoring Is Hard!

I know what many pastors are thinking as you read this. Especially small church pastors, because I'm one of you.

Mentoring sounds hard.

You barely have time to do the basic pastoring tasks in your church, let alone mentor everyone, no matter how big or small your church may be. Buying a book or a curriculum packet is so much easier than a hands-on investment in all those lives.

I get it. I thought the same thing for many years. But mentoring is not about asking any one person, including the pastor, to be responsible for all the discipleship in a church.

The beauty of mentoring is that it doesn't just create smarter Christians. It raises up new mentors. That's one of the huge advantages of a mentoring-based discipleship process over one that's curriculum-based.

So how can we institute a mentoring process in our churches – especially our smaller churches?

I'm glad you asked. In my next post we'll walk through that, with [*Mentoring Is Better than Curriculum: Seven Steps to Better Discipleship*](#).

Let's bring mentoring back.

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